

May 2, 2010

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Now Don't Hear This

By GEORGE PROCHNIK

LAST Wednesday was International Noise Awareness Day, but if you missed it, you weren't alone. Begun in New York 15 years ago as a grass-roots effort to educate people about the harmful health effects of excessive noise, Noise Awareness Day rapidly gained attention and advocates around the world. Gradually, though, America's enthusiasm for the day began to abate. This year, in New York City, a mobile unit offered free hearing tests behind City Hall — that was about it for one of the noisiest cities on earth.

The scale of our noise problem isn't in doubt. In recent years [rigorous studies](#) on the health consequences of noise have indicated that noise elevates heart rate, blood pressure, vasoconstriction and stress hormone levels, and increases risk for heart attacks. These reports prove that even when we've become mentally habituated to noise, the damage it does to our physiologies continues unchecked.

Studies done on sleeping subjects show that signs of stress surge in response to noise like air traffic even when people don't wake. Moderate noise from white-noise machines, air-conditioners and background television, for example, can still undermine children's language acquisition. Warnings about playing Walkmans and iPods too loudly have been around for years, but some experts now believe that even at reasonable volumes a direct sound-feed into the ears for hours on end may degrade our hearing.

Yet by focusing on the issue exclusively from a negative perspective, in a world awash with things to worry about, we may just be adding to the public's sense of self-compassion fatigue. Rather than rant about noise, we need to create a passionate case for silence.

Evidence for the benefits of silence continues to mount. Studies have demonstrated that [silent meditation improves](#) practitioners' ability to concentrate. Teachers able to introduce silence into classrooms [report that it fosters learning](#) and reflection among overstimulated students. Professionals involved with conflict resolution have found that by incorporating times of silence into negotiations they've been able to foster empathy that inspires a peaceable end to disputes. The old idea of quiet zones around hospitals has found new validation in studies linking silence and healing. These are macro benefits, but often silence feels good on a purely animal level.

If you have the means, you buy your luxury silence in the form of spa time, or products like quiet vacuums, which are always more expensive than their roaring bargain cousins. The affluent pay for boutique silence because, like silk on the flesh and wine on the palate, silence can kindle a sensory delight.

Unfortunately, in a world of diminishing natural retreats and amplifying electronic escapes, this delight is in ever shorter supply. The days when Thoreau could write of silence as “a universal refuge” and “inviolable asylum” are gone. With all our gadgetry punching up the volume at home, in entertainment zones and even

places of worship, young people today often lack any haven for quiet.

These problems are everywhere, but can be especially acute in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Too many people think of silence only in terms of “being silenced,” of suppressing truth. In consequence, silence itself is now often suppressed.

People who appreciate the values of silence have, by and large, done a poor job of sharing their understanding — let alone of actually making silence more democratically accessible. Yet silence can be nourished in our larger spaces not just by way of an inward journey most people lack the tools to embark upon, but through education and architecture.

Some of the imaginative work being done today by urban planners involved with soundscaping demonstrates that it's easier to create oases of quiet — by, for example, creating common areas on the rear sides of buildings with plantings that absorb sound — than it is to lower the volume of a larger area by even a few decibels. And having access to these oases can greatly enhance quality of life.

A recent Swedish study found that even people who live in loud neighborhoods report a 50 percent drop in their general noise annoyance levels if residential buildings have a quiet side. These modest sanctuaries can provide at least a taste of silence, which is then recognized not to be silence at all, but the sounds of the larger world we inhabit: birdsong and footsteps, water, voices and wind.

Perhaps rather than observing a muted Noise Awareness Day, next year we should declare the whole of April to be International Silence Awareness Month: an opportunity to think about how to bring a positive experience of silence to the growing numbers of people who live in a relentless wave of sound. Even a little bit of silence can create a sense of connection with our environment that diminishes alienation, and prompts a desire to discover more quiet.

George Prochnik is the author, most recently, of “In Pursuit of Silence.”

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